

## **Dr. Billy Taylor, “America’s Classical Music,” and the Role of the Jazz Ambassador**

Tom Arnold-Forster

Jesus College, Cambridge

[tpa24@cam.ac.uk](mailto:tpa24@cam.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

The idea of jazz as “America’s classical music” has become a powerful way of defining the music, asserting its national and artistic value, and shaping its scholarly study. The present article provides a history of this idea through a close analysis of its primary theorist and most visible spokesperson, Dr. Billy Taylor. It argues that the idea was not a neoclassical and conservative product of the 1980s, but had important roots in the Black Arts imperatives of the later 1960s and early 1970s. It suggests that Taylor initially made the idea work inventively and productively in a variety of contexts, especially through his community arts project Jazzmobile, but these contexts diverged as he was stretched thin across and beyond the United States. The idea’s disintegration into clichéd ubiquity in the mid-1980s then provides a critical perspective on the idea of the “jazz renaissance,” and an opportunity to consider the role of the jazz ambassador in the context of debates about African American intellectuals.

“America’s classical music” has been a prominent answer to the persistent question of what jazz is. It challenges the drugs-and-brothels imagery that has long lingered around the music, and it rejects, perhaps too confidently, the notion that jazz is essentially enigmatic. In 1984, the critic Grover Sales published *Jazz: America’s Classical Music*, which pronounced the music a grand artistic heritage. For Sales, jazz was a “miraculous cathedral” for all Americans, which “served as a fulcrum to overturn centuries-old fears and misunderstandings between white and black America that poisoned our national life.”<sup>1</sup> In this upbeat vision, appealing narratives of art and nation subsumed sticky questions of race. Sales was not alone. From the mid-1980s, many critics and musicians presented affirmative, elevating, and tradition-conscious ideas of jazz, which were so conspicuous that it has become usual to periodize the years since as a “jazz renaissance.” Pre-eminent in this era are the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, his mentors Albert Murray and Stanley Crouch, and their founding of Jazz at Lincoln Center. Even politicians got involved. In 1987, the U.S. Congress passed the Jazz Preservation Act, which declared the music “a rare and valuable national American treasure.”<sup>2</sup> And, in 1993, Bill Clinton told a White House gathering that “jazz is really America’s classical music.”<sup>3</sup>

Scholars were sceptical. “There is a revolution underway in jazz that lies not in any internal crisis of style,” argued Scott DeVeaux in 1991, “but in the debate over the looming new orthodoxy: jazz as ‘America’s classical music.’” The idea imposed “a kind of deadening uniformity of cultural meaning on the music.” Its narratives were suffocating, its nationalism sickly. It strangled attempts to make the study of

---

<sup>1</sup> Grover Sales, *Jazz: America’s Classical Music* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1984), 4-6.

<sup>2</sup> H.R. 57, 100th Congress (1987); see also Jeff Farley, “Jazz as a Black American Art Form: Definitions of the Jazz Preservation Act,” *Journal of American Studies* Volume 24, No 1 (February 2011), 113-29.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Clinton, “Remarks on the 40th Anniversary of the Newport Jazz Festival,” 18 Jun. 1993, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton*, 16 Vols. (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1994-2001), Vol. 1, 883.

jazz “more responsive to issues of historical particularity.”<sup>4</sup> DeVaux’s argument became an influential “clarion call,” with many concurring that jazz histories “need not follow the narrative trajectory that many have constructed for ‘classical music.’”<sup>5</sup> Researchers began to draw on history, musicology, American studies, sociology, and literary criticism. They uncovered hidden histories, refused grand narratives, and focussed on the complexity of cultural meaning. In the “new jazz studies,” impatience with “America’s classical music” became habitual. The idea was jazz’s “favorite dictum,” a “frequently invoked phrase,” a piece of “high-art dogma,” one of the “pious clichés” that existed about the music.<sup>6</sup> By 2002, it was observed that “the once common notion that jazz might be thought of as ‘America’s classical music’ has long been discredited.”<sup>7</sup>

But beneath the dismissals lay hesitancy. Many were wary of tackling a narrative that had done much to elevate the music, and which had certainly helped to legitimize the study of jazz in universities.<sup>8</sup> DeVaux put his anxieties in parentheses: “(it hardly seems fair, in any case, to deconstruct a narrative that has only recently been constructed, especially one that serves such important purposes).”<sup>9</sup> “It may be a little unfair,” echoed Krin Gabbard, “to deconstruct a canonical view of jazz history

---

<sup>4</sup> Scott DeVaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Black American Literature Forum* Volume 25, No 3 (Autumn 1991), 553.

<sup>5</sup> John Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 13; David Ake, *Jazz Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 81. The most recent analysis and critique of DeVaux is Sherrie Tucker, “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: The ‘Subjectless Subject’ of New Jazz Studies,” in *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, ed. David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 264-80.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Giddins, *Visions of Jazz: The First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 587; DeVaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” 525; David Ake, *Jazz Matters: Sound, Place, and Time since Bebop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 5; Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, 374.

<sup>7</sup> Mervyn Cooke, “Jazz Among the Classics, and the Case of Duke Ellington,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, ed. Mervyn Cooke and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 153.

<sup>8</sup> See Tucker, “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition,” 267-69.

<sup>9</sup> DeVaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” 553.

so soon after it has been constructed.”<sup>10</sup> So a peculiar ambiguity emerged amongst the scholars. “America’s classical music” represented everything jazz studies sought to move beyond, but was not much lingered over. It was simply summoned to stand for the suspect arguments of “such prominent spokespeople for jazz as Billy Taylor, Wynton Marsalis, and Gunther Schuller,” or “Grover Sales, Reginald Buckner, and many others.”<sup>11</sup> Or Albert Murray, Stanley Crouch, Ken Burns, the Jazz Preservation Act, American exceptionalism, neoclassicism, neotraditionalism, neoliberalism, indeed the entire “jazz renaissance.” In academic circles, “America’s classical music” became a truly “once common notion”: a straw man regularly wheeled out for a good duffing up, but kept well stuffed for the sake of the music and the field. It remains an important idea poorly understood, routinely invoked but rarely interrogated. There is a need to probe its origins, untangle its meanings, and explore its influence.

For these tasks, the pianist and educator Billy Taylor is useful. He certainly claimed to have coined the phrase, though it has sometimes been attributed to Duke Ellington or James Baldwin.<sup>12</sup> What is clear is that Taylor was the idea’s primary theorist and most visible spokesperson. He produced its first formal rendering in his 1975 doctoral dissertation, and went on to articulate it across a range of forums as America’s premier jazz ambassador before Wynton Marsalis. Scholarship on Taylor is small. The brief discussions that do exist tend to cast him as an elder statesman of the jazz renaissance: Robert Walser anthologizes Taylor’s ideas in “The Eighties,”

---

<sup>10</sup> Krin Gabbard, “The Jazz Canon and Its Consequences,” in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 18.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Walser, ““Out of Notes”: Signification, Interpretation, and the Problem of Miles Davis,” in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, 170; George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 85. See also Ake, *Jazz Cultures*, 163; Ake, *Jazz Matters*, 183n4; DeVaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” 553n1.

<sup>12</sup> Martha Bayles, “What’s Wrong with Being Classical?” *Antioch Review* Volume 57, No 3 (Summer 1999), 318; Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 17.

while Eric Porter aligns them with those of Murray, Crouch, and Marsalis.<sup>13</sup> This article puts Taylor center stage. He enables a close contextual analysis of the idea of jazz as “America’s classical music,” and a careful account of its use across a range of cultural arenas within and beyond the United States. He also offers an opportunity to consider the role of the jazz ambassador in the context of debates about the place of, and challenges facing, African Americans intellectuals in the later twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> For Taylor reveals, in unusual depth, what is involved in the jazz ambassador’s struggle to make words about music do things.

William Edward Taylor Jr. was born into a middle class and musical family in 1921 and grew up in a segregated Washington, DC. He concentrated on the piano from a young age, was taught by Dunbar High School bandleader Henry Grant (who also taught Ellington), and studied first sociology then music at Virginia State University. He moved to New York in 1944, where he became Art Tatum’s protégé and emerged as a reliably polished bebop player at the heart of the jazz community. He married his college girlfriend Teddi Castion in 1946, became the house pianist at Birdland from 1949-51, and had a moderately successful recording career with a range of trios, playing mostly bebop, sometimes Latin.<sup>15</sup> As the musical director of the 1958 television series *The Subject is Jazz*, he pioneered jazz education and

---

<sup>13</sup> Robert Walser, ed., *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 327-32; Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 94. Only two books have been published on Taylor: an oral history tribute, William F. Lee, *Taylor for Jazz: The Life and Music of Billy Taylor* (Silver Spring, MD: Beckham, 2008); and an autobiography, Billy Taylor with Teresa L. Reed, *The Jazz Life of Dr. Billy Taylor* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> See William M. Banks, *Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in Urban Life* (New York: Norton, 1996); Daniel Matlin, *On the Corner: African American Intellectuals and the Urban Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919-1941* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Existing work on jazz ambassadors focuses on global encounters and Cold War constraints (Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*), though for a valuable overview which touches on jazz ambassadors as black intellectuals, see Porter, *This Thing Called Jazz*.

<sup>15</sup> See Billy Taylor, *Billy Taylor Trio* (Prestige 24154, 1953); Taylor, *The Billy Taylor Trio With Candido* (Prestige OJCCD015-2, 1954); and Taylor, *The New Billy Taylor Trio* (Paramount ABCS-226, 1957).

displayed aesthetic versatility. From the early 1960s, he worked more and more in broadcasting and education. He had a daily radio show in New York, lectured at Yale, and became active in the civil rights movement.<sup>16</sup> In 1964, he helped to found a community arts project in Harlem named Jazzmobile, and in 1969 he became the first black musical director of a national talk show, the *David Frost Show*. As Taylor's public profile grew, so did his need to define jazz for a wider audience. He often evaded this difficulty by locating identity in multiplicity. "I resist the idea of saying jazz is any one thing," he told the journalist Phyl Garland in 1969. "Jazz is *many* things and I believe it is *this* that makes it so durable."<sup>17</sup>

In 1970, Taylor enrolled in a doctoral program in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. His educational role was growing alongside his public profile, and the jazz market remained stubbornly marginal. Moreover, the University of Massachusetts was becoming something of a center for jazz musicians in the early 1970s. Reggie Workman, Yusef Lateef, Max Roach, Cannonball Adderly, Archie Shepp, Roberta Flack, Bill Barron, Kenny Barron, Jimmy Owens, and Chris White were all enrolled in courses across the Education, Music, and Black Studies departments.<sup>18</sup> Most were mid-career New York players who had long moved in similar circles to Taylor; many were members of the same organizations, notably the Collective Black Artists (CBA). Faculty members like Ortiz Waltz, Roland Wiggins, and Frederick Tillis were also pioneers in the growing field of black music scholarship. Taylor's dissertation committee consisted of Wiggins, Tillis, and, as chair, Mary Beaven, who was director of the Arts and

---

<sup>16</sup> On Taylor's benefit performances for the movement, see Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Phyl Garland, *The Sound of Soul* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1969), 211 (emphasis in original).

<sup>18</sup> List compiled from Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious as Your Life: The Story of the New Jazz* (London: Allison & Busby, 1977), Ch. 16; Porter, *This Thing Called Jazz*, 234-36; and Mary Beaven to Jerry and Clara Floyd, 22 Oct. 1974, box 194, folder 12, Billy Taylor Papers, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter cited as "*BTP*, [box]/[folder]").

Humanities program and who had done much to make the university such a collaborative environment. Musicians involved themselves in designing and teaching courses, faculty found their way to CBA conferences, and all formed an exceptionally vibrant community in which to think about jazz. “Just having the experience of being on campus and in the company of folks like that and having the opportunity to pursue some of your ideas will influence you,” remembered Workman. “And indeed it did.”<sup>19</sup>

It was in Massachusetts that Taylor began to argue that jazz was “America’s classical music.” He can be found testing the idea in interviews as early as 1972, with direct reference to his academic work. “Jazz is a form,” he told *Billboard*. “All the research I’m currently conducting leads to this conclusion. It’s America’s classical music, and all the styles of music, classical, folk, rock and popular, surface within this one area we call jazz.”<sup>20</sup> The idea that jazz is a distinct musical form was not, of course, an original product of Taylor’s researches, but a part of rich debates in African American intellectual history, which stretched back to the early twentieth century, about the status of jazz. Many black composers, musicians, and writers had engaged in playing with the boundaries between “jazz” and “classical.” Alain Locke, for instance, saw in jazz an evolution from popular folk music to national art music, which promised “to become one of the main sources of America’s serious or classical music.”<sup>21</sup> Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston disagreed with Locke’s developmentalist arguments, and saw powerful social and political implications in the folk memory of the blues.<sup>22</sup> But, it will be argued, Taylor’s later idea of “America’s

---

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Porter, *This Thing Called Jazz*, 236.

<sup>20</sup> Sam Sutherland, “Taylor Puts Jazz into Focus, Discusses Problems, Growth,” *Billboard*, 6 May 1972, 24.

<sup>21</sup> Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Washington, DC: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 2.

<sup>22</sup> See Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), Ch. 4. On the broader debate, cf. Lorenzo Thomas, *Don’t Deny My Name: Words and Music in the Black Intellectual Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of

classical music” did not result from a close engagement with this tradition. His was an indirect encounter, mediated through more immediate, more local sources.

Taylor’s dissertation, completed in August 1975, is the fullest exposition of his idea. *The History and Development of Jazz Piano: A New Perspective for Educators* is a complex text, which performs multiple roles for various audiences. Taylor announced it as “an opportunity to synthesize and integrate what I have learned during my lifetime and to assimilate this information into one written document for both musician and non-musician as well as for the educator and the general public.”<sup>23</sup> Its central argument, that jazz “may now be considered America’s classical music,” is historical; its first twelve chapters narrate a long history of jazz, often though not always through the piano.<sup>24</sup> Chapters thirteen and fourteen then present a formal musicological defence of the argument, and draw out some “implications for education.”

The history of jazz began with a national history of slavery. “When Africans came to this country as slaves,” argued Taylor, “they brought their musical traditions with them.”<sup>25</sup> By skating over the colonial era, he was able to establish that “African music” became “American music” through the historical reality of an enslaved population. “Because Africans did not have the freedom to maintain their cultural identity, their musical traditions had to change,” and they had to change in a different country.<sup>26</sup> Work songs, field hollers, spirituals: these were “obliged” musical legacies of slavery.<sup>27</sup> They showed that the origins of jazz were necessarily, rather than

---

Michigan Press, 2008); and Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), Ch. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Billy Taylor, “The History and Development of Jazz Piano: A New Perspective for Educators” (PhD dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1975), 11. Taylor’s *Jazz Piano: History and Development* (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown, 1982) was a revised version of his dissertation.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, “History and Development,” 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*



willingly, American. While “surviving slavery and other forms of racism in America,” black Americans “created something of beauty... a new idiom, Afro-American music.” From this would come “America’s classical music.”<sup>28</sup> Taylor put slave agency at the center of a history which entwined ideas of nation with ideas of race from the start, and which used this dualism as a broad framework for the narrative. Taylor’s history was about struggle and progress, urban migration and Jim Crow segregation. It conceived of race in terms of a black/white binary, and had a core sense that the history of America was the history of race in America.

The link between nineteenth-century slave structures and twentieth-century musical forms was not obvious, but Taylor’s account of ragtime made the connection. Departing from conventional understandings of ragtime as essentially the late nineteenth-century piano music of Scott Joplin, Taylor presented it expansively as “the earliest form of jazz.”<sup>29</sup> It encompassed the mid-nineteenth-century pianists Louis Moreau Gottschalk and Lucien Lambert, as well as the twentieth-century giant Eubie Blake. It was both “the leisure-time music of slaves on Southern plantations” and “the music of performers in taverns, barrel houses, and other places of entertainment and social activity.”<sup>30</sup> It was also audible in a range of later blues styles: boogie, stride, even the “urban blues” of 1920s Chicago, New York, and Kansas City. Despite stylistic variation and the exploitation of white record companies, Taylor insisted that the urban blues retained “many of the rural Southern traditions” and formed the foundation for the jazz that followed.<sup>31</sup> In urban sprawl, “jazz grew as an

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 75.

expression of black consciousness.”<sup>32</sup> Taylor then deployed a familiar trope to make a striking point about the music’s racial identity:

At the same time it was becoming a melting pot of musical ideas and attitudes of other American ethnic groups. The Afro-American value system was the determining factor of what elements remained in the music or were discarded. Did the music make you want to dance, party, get drunk, make love? Afro-American music had to have a function, had to say something to the person, or it was altered or discarded.<sup>33</sup>

Taylor appropriated the national metaphor of the “melting pot” and recast it as the product of an “Afro-American value system.” This system determined what the pot produced: nation and race were linked such that the racial structured the national. The metaphor also displayed Taylor’s sociological imagination, a legacy of his undergraduate study: group consciousness, social structure, and systems of value were his analytical tools. The blues that lay at the heart of jazz were “not abstract exercises,” but “concrete expressions of black consciousness... deeply rooted in the Afro-American’s own perception of who he is and what he is about.”<sup>34</sup> The blues showed that “jazz from its beginnings to the present must be examined with the value system of its creators, Afro-American musicians.”<sup>35</sup>

The fundamental value in this system was functionality. Taylor did not have a precise theory of “functionality,” but he was clear that it had to involve swing. This was what made bebop functional music instead of more purely listening music: “no

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 52.

matter how syncopated or intricate a jazz passage may be, the basic beat must never lose its vitality. It must swing, or it is stylistically incorrect.”<sup>36</sup> Bebop, Taylor argued, was “a good example of the ‘melting pot’ aspect of jazz.”<sup>37</sup> Community agency was another important aspect of functionality for Taylor. Jazz was “everywhere in the black community – in theatres, tent shows, on records, at dances, parties, picnics, parades, funerals – everywhere.”<sup>38</sup> A historically contingent “black consciousness” thus mattered in altering or discarding elements of jazz. Indeed, Taylor worked to establish this consciousness across black communities by arguing that, as a consequence of white racism, “musically trained black musicians and untrained black musicians were influencing one another in more ways than either group cared to admit.”<sup>39</sup> He had little time for Great Men, and argued that “jazz did not develop solely through the impact of a series of well-known, outstanding, innovative musicians... styles rapidly became the common property of an entire generation.”<sup>40</sup> He consciously differentiated himself from André Hodeir and Gunther Schuller, white critics who presented “the history of jazz as the impact of one individual upon another.”<sup>41</sup> Yet this also separated him from other black contemporaries, for, unlike Albert Murray or Stanley Crouch, Taylor did not speak in terms of “heroes” or

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 114-15. This echoed a view Taylor had presented in an earlier textbook: *Billy Taylor's Basic Be-Bop Instruction for Piano* (New York: Charles H. Hansen, 1949), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, “History and Development,” 123. Taylor saw bebop as a stylistic development, deploying the term “prebop”, but this did not evacuate it of social and cultural meaning; cf. the distinction between “stylistic evolution” and “social revolution” in Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1-31.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, “History and Development,” 80.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 7.

“genius.”<sup>42</sup> Nor was he given to dismissals of the social sciences as “categorical jargon.”<sup>43</sup> For Taylor, jazz history was social history.

The “Afro-American value system” also had implications for authorial authenticity. A “black perspective” was crucial to understanding jazz, but because there were “only a few black writers who write consistently and intelligently about jazz... the Afro-American aesthetic value system is not as much in evidence in writing as it is in radio broadcasting and on records.”<sup>44</sup> So Taylor took time to recommend more suitable authors. Ortiz Walton, Phyl Garland, Hildred Roach, Eileen Southern, and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) were all praised as “blacks who have directed their attention to the problems caused by having black Americans judged by the wrong criteria and recorded from the wrong perspective.”<sup>45</sup> These authors provided the backbone of Taylor’s secondary reading. He occasionally cited older authors in his dissertation, including Alain Locke and white critics like Leonard Feather and Marshall Stearns, though rarely more than once, and he did not single them out. Rather, Taylor’s account of jazz history rested on the more proximate wave of early 1970s black music scholarship represented by Southern, Roach, and Walton.<sup>46</sup> Their work reflected a new impetus to document the cultural power of black music, and often drew inspiration from the Black Arts movement, and in

---

<sup>42</sup> See Albert Murray, “The Function of the Heroic Image,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 569-79; and Stanley Crouch, *Considering Genius* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfry, 1970), 5.

<sup>44</sup> Taylor, “History and Development,” 153.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Ortiz Walton, *Music: Black, White, and Blue* (New York: William Morrow, 1972); Hildred Roach, *Black American Music: Past and Present* (Boston: Crescendo, 1973); Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: Norton, 1971); and Eileen Southern, ed., *Readings in Black American Music* (New York: Norton, 1971). See also Garland, *Sound of Soul*; Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (New York: Holt, 1971); A. B. Spellman, *Black Music* (New York: Schocken, 1970); and Valerie Wilmer, *Jazz People* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), who were all also cited by Taylor.

particular Baraka's 1963 *Blues People*.<sup>47</sup> Baraka had also argued that blues was functional and communal music, the expression of a collective black consciousness, the sound of an oppressed social group who were necessarily Americans, and a music that told the story of America.<sup>48</sup>

Taylor's emphasis on Baraka is significant. There were many areas where they diverged: Taylor was far more willing to trumpet America, and by 1975 Baraka had abandoned both bohemianism and black cultural nationalism for Marxism.<sup>49</sup> But Taylor recommended *Blues People* and Baraka's more radical *Black Music* six times in his dissertation, which was more than any other author.<sup>50</sup> Baraka is also the only literary figure to feature; neither Langston Hughes nor Ralph Ellison gets a mention. Crucially, neither does Albert Murray, even though his *Omni-Americans* had been published in 1970, and even though this was something Taylor had apparently read, for it featured in the bibliography of his dissertation proposal.<sup>51</sup> Murray's *Stomping the Blues*, which influentially cast the blues as good-time music, was not published until 1976.<sup>52</sup> Taylor does not, then, slot neatly into a Murray-Crouch-Marsalis lineage. Rather, he drew significantly on Baraka.

Can the musical director of the *David Frost Show* really be identified with the Black Arts movement? If Taylor seems an unusual Black Artist, it is worth remembering that recent studies undermine conventional understandings of the movement as only or simply the sensationalist cultural arm of separatist political

---

<sup>47</sup> On this historiographical moment, see Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), Ch. 6, esp. 155-58.

<sup>48</sup> LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1963).

<sup>49</sup> See Daniel Matlin, "'Lift Up Yr Self!': Reinterpreting Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Black Power, and the Uplift Tradition," *Journal of American History* Volume 93, No 1 (June 2006), 91-116.

<sup>50</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1967).

<sup>51</sup> Billy Taylor, "History and Development of Jazz Piano: A Proposal for a Dissertation," *BTP*, 135/4.

<sup>52</sup> Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976). Taylor did not cite Murray's earlier study, *The Hero and the Blues* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973), either.

militancy, and instead emphasize diffusion and diversity.<sup>53</sup> Taylor happily performed as part of a 1968 concert titled “Focus... the Black Artist,” though his “bespectacled, clean-cut” image contrasted, for one reviewer, with the dashiki-clad performers from Blafrica Productions, who were also on the bill.<sup>54</sup> Taylor’s playing in the later 1960s also moved away from bebop in the direction of soul jazz, most famously with his gospel-inflected composition, “I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free.”<sup>55</sup> Some of Nina Simone’s versions of this song ended with the lines “Say it clear, say it loud/I am *black* and I am *proud*!”<sup>56</sup> Further, Taylor’s links with the Collective Black Artists only grew stronger in Massachusetts. In 1978, the CBA put on a whole evening of his music.<sup>57</sup>

Most importantly, Taylor had co-founded a Black Arts project of sorts in 1964, along with the Harlem Cultural Council and arts patron Daphne Arnstein. Jazzmobile has received scant scholarly attention, and is not usually considered in histories of the Black Arts movement. Yet it gave free outdoor concerts, ran community programs in Harlem, and was certainly “opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community,” as Larry Neal’s famous manifesto for the movement put it.<sup>58</sup> Baraka even claimed that his own Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School inspired Jazzmobile.<sup>59</sup> This is probably an exaggeration, but it nonetheless underlines the point that Jazzmobile grew out of a fertile mid-1960s

---

<sup>53</sup> Lisa Gail Collins and Mary Natalie Crawford, eds., *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006); James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

<sup>54</sup> Louisa Kreisberg, “‘Focus... the Black Artist’ Ends with Jazz Bash at Marymount,” *Citizen Register* (Ossing, NY), 17 Feb. 1968.

<sup>55</sup> Billy Taylor, *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free* (Tower ST-5111, 1967); cf. Billy Taylor *Sleeping Bee* (MPS Records 7096, 1969).

<sup>56</sup> Garland, *Sound of Soul*, 179 (emphasis in original); cf. Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels to be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), Ch. 3.

<sup>57</sup> John S. Wilson, “Jazz: Billy Taylor,” *New York Times*, 17 Jul. 1978.

<sup>58</sup> Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *TDR: The Drama Review* Volume 12, No 4 (Summer 1968), 29.

<sup>59</sup> Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (New York: Freundlich Books, 1984), 211-12.

milieu in which Black Arts imperatives mattered. And, by 1972, just when Taylor began testing out “America’s classical music” in interviews, Jazzmobile also began using the idea in promotional materials. “Jazz is America’s Classical Music and its many styles reflect the best in our musical heritage,” ran the first sentence at the top of the first page of a 1972 brochure. The text on its cover made its cultural politics clear: “One thing almost as important as the contributions Blacks have made to America, is the fact that it’s been kept secret so long.”<sup>60</sup> Far from exceptionalist-Americanist platitude, Jazzmobile used the idea of “America’s classical music” as part of a Black Arts imperative.

So Taylor insisted that jazz was functional, collective, and black. And Black Arts theorists insisted that black art was “functional, collective and committing or committed.”<sup>61</sup> But Taylor also cautioned against “the polarization that stems from black people discovering who we are,” did not argue that jazz was the exclusive property of African Americans, and never embraced an Afro-centric black cultural nationalism.<sup>62</sup> When it came to the nation, Taylor saw jazz as “truly American.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the simultaneous blackness and American-ness of “America’s classical music” gave it a political edge stronger than accommodation or integration. The idea pushed the black experience to the center of the American experience, insisted that black music was necessarily American music, and refused to apologize for its Afro-American value system. Taylor’s prescriptions could sometimes sound like those of Albert Murray, whose cultural triumphalism often flirted with black cultural

---

<sup>60</sup> Jazzmobile brochure, 1972, *BTP*, 164/15.

<sup>61</sup> Ron Karenga, “Black Cultural Nationalism,” in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle Jr. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 33.

<sup>62</sup> John S. Wilson, “Billy Taylor,” *International Musician*, Feb. 1971, 6.

<sup>63</sup> Taylor, “History and Development,” 22.

nationalism.<sup>64</sup> Yet Taylor also drew on Baraka's ideas about collective black consciousness, and favoured sociological analysis over heroic individualism. Murray and Baraka were bitter intellectual opponents, but in Taylor their ideas were not incompatible. Black Americans, Taylor argued, should accept and even embrace the American dimensions of jazz. And, he insisted, its collective and functional black perspective had to be genuinely understood for this to be meaningful. For race structured the national melting pot, and the fundamental story of jazz was about black consciousness creating, from slavery, through struggle, "America's classical music."

Taylor's account of later jazz styles sometimes found the implications of this narrative difficult. Cool jazz was easily dispensed with as something for "introspective, detached" musicians more likely to be white, and as an attempt "to reorder the basic elements of jazz."<sup>65</sup> But while free jazz was important to many Black Arts theorists, its avant-garde aesthetic was insufficiently "functional" on Taylor's terms, and he found it hard to fit into his narrative. "Where am I in relation to this music?" he asked himself in his notes. It was a question that his supervisor Mary Beaven had forced him to consider: "See Mary's note!!!"<sup>66</sup> Taylor's final judgement was strained. He did not much like or play experimental music, and he preferred to avoid it. "Freedom does not necessarily mean chaos," he warned, "but it does put other burdens on the players."<sup>67</sup> Soul music, conversely, was welcomed. Its functionality was never in doubt, and Taylor ambitiously cast it as part of jazz. He highlighted his own "I Wish I Knew" as something that "the black community sang,"

---

<sup>64</sup> On Murray's implicit black cultural nationalism, see Henry Louis Gates Jr., "King of Cats: Albert Murray," in *The Henry Louis Gates Jr. Reader*, ed. Abby Wolf (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 313-31.

<sup>65</sup> Taylor, "History and Development," 122, 139.

<sup>66</sup> Dissertation notes, *BTP*, 133/37.

<sup>67</sup> Taylor, "History and Development," 175.



along with Aretha Franklin's "Respect" and James Brown's "I'm Black and I'm Proud."<sup>68</sup>

Most of Taylor's dissertation, then, was a history of jazz that spent its intellectual energy tackling the dynamics of race and nation. "Classical music," however, had fallen entirely by the wayside, for Taylor's ideas about art had been mostly defined by aesthetic value systems associated with "black consciousness." This gave Mary Beaven sleepless nights. "Several times over the past few weeks I have woken up in the middle of the night worried," she wrote to Taylor in a one a.m. panic. "So far in your dissertation you have not presented any – or many – coherent arguments that jazz is America's classical music. You can easily make the case of its being the most indigenous music, but I do not feel that you have made the case for jazz being a classical music." To be "academically respectful," Beaven urged devoting a whole chapter to the idea of "classical music" and arguing that jazz conformed to this. She did not suggest engaging with the rich tradition of African American thinking about jazz as a formal music, but she did provide Taylor with a number of dictionary definitions of the word "classical," which were rooted in European notions about Greco-Roman antiquity. "I really believe in that argument," she implored, "but I think you need to wrestle with that one."<sup>69</sup>

Taylor followed Beaven's advice, and devoted chapter thirteen of his dissertation to a formal musicological defense of the idea that jazz could be understood as a classical music. He began by showing that, like classical music, jazz could be formally analysed in terms of syntax, semantics, and kinesthetics. Deploying two ideas of "classical music" – a standard definition of canonical European art music

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>69</sup> Mary Beaven to Billy Taylor, "Wednesday 1:00 am," *BTP*, 194/23.

and an account of Indian classical music emphasising oral indigenous tradition – he then arrived at his defense:

European, Indian, American, or whatever, a classical music must be time-tested, it must serve as a standard or model, it must have established value, and it must be indigenous to the culture it speaks for. Jazz fulfils all these conditions for being considered a classical music, and because it is particularly sensitive to historical and sociological trends in America, it represents a unique American tradition.<sup>70</sup>

This is thin. Jazz was classical because Taylor had made it conform to dictionary definitions. His terse analysis differed markedly from his subtle historical narrative, and, in pivoting to “historical and sociological trends in America,” he sought to return to familiar ground. There was relief in his reaffirmation of the centrality of nation and race at the end of his chapter. Jazz, he concluded, was “music which springs from self-respect, self-knowledge, and the need to celebrate black consciousness in a society which is unaware of its debt to black people. A basic form of American musical expression which speaks eloquently for our way of life, jazz is America’s classical music.”<sup>71</sup>

So the “classical” in “America’s classical music” was not centrally a musicological or even a historical claim, but a powerful label with desirable connotations and Eurocentric legitimations. Taylor was giving himself enough academic cover to harness gravity, substance, and above all *seriousness* to jazz. Black music was not just America’s music: as America’s classical music, it demanded

---

<sup>70</sup> Taylor, ‘History and Development’, 190.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 192-93.

respect and financial support. As Taylor detailed in his final chapter, there were “implications for education.” These ranged from community projects to plug short-term holes to large-scale attempts to rectify “the systematic exclusion of jazz and other Afro-American music from the American educational process.”<sup>72</sup> The scale of the problem was vast. As he told his examiners in his viva voce, “deeply rooted racism, ignorance, paternalism, greed, prejudice and other non-musical elements... alter the development of jazz and stunt the artistic growth of students.”<sup>73</sup>

Ultimately, the idea of jazz as “America’s classical music” was Taylor’s three-word solution to these myriad difficulties. It confronted a range of entrenched attitudes and short attention spans with a memorable slogan that kept art, nation, and race in a careful balance. CBA members in Massachusetts remained diffident about the “classical” label: Beaven reported that Kenny Barron and Yusef Lateef “were not much help” with the idea.<sup>74</sup> Reggie Workman preferred the term “Black Classical Music,” which revised earlier lines of Harlem Renaissance thought.<sup>75</sup> But Taylor’s idea had carefully configured internal dynamics, which built on local sources: race gave meaning to nation, which gave meaning to classical art. And, from another angle, race structured what art was meant to be through the Afro-American value system. “America’s classical music” insisted that jazz was simultaneously and meaningfully black music and American music, that jazz was as serious as any classical music, and that everyone should be educated as such. It was a subtle attempt to make a complex music cohere.

How successful it was is another matter. Taylor had wrestled with the idea inside the academy, but using it as a jazz ambassador, with wider audiences in other

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>73</sup> Notes for “Orals,” *BTP*, 135/4.

<sup>74</sup> Mary Beaven to Billy Taylor, “Wednesday 1:00 am,” *BTP*, 194/23.

<sup>75</sup> Porter, *This Thing Called Jazz*, 236; on links with the Harlem Renaissance, see Thomas, *Don’t Deny My Name*, 99-102.

contexts, would be harder. Jazzmobile remained a powerful way to promote it. The roving float upon which it performed free outdoor concerts was “decorated in white wrought-iron New Orleans-style scroll work” and had “a sign on it saying, ‘JAZZ – AMERICA’S CLASSICAL MUSIC.’”<sup>76</sup> Literally a vehicle for the idea, Jazzmobile sought to put Taylor’s “Afro-American value system” into practice by cultivating links with New York’s black communities. “The float doesn’t just suddenly appear,” Taylor told *Down Beat*. “We are invited by block associations. We wanted a liaison between us and the neighborhoods because we wanted an ongoing relationship.”<sup>77</sup> The float prized functional, collective music of the sort Taylor had described in his dissertation. So it mostly featured black artists who played music that swung, like Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, Lionel Hampton, once even Ellington. Many members of the Collective Black Artists also performed, including Jimmy Owens and Max Roach.<sup>78</sup> Jazzmobile was also a stage for music explicitly about the relationship between race and nation, like Jimmy Heath’s “Afro-American Suite of Evolution” or Ernie Wilkins’s “Four Black Immortals” (a suite about Paul Robeson, Jackie Robinson, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King).<sup>79</sup>

Yet there were tensions in Jazzmobile’s Black Arts imperative. Taylor’s idea of “functional” jazz did not include the avant-garde, which struggled to find a space on the float. For instance, Leroy Jenkins, a violinist and a prominent member of Chicago’s Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), failed to get a gig for his experimental collective, the Revolutionary Ensemble. So he wrote to

---

<sup>76</sup> “The Talk of the Town,” *New Yorker*, 28 Aug. 1978, 20.

<sup>77</sup> Arnold Jay Smith, “Jazzmobile: Magnetizing the Arts,” *Down Beat*, 1 Dec. 1977, 14.

<sup>78</sup> The links to the CBA were also institutional, for the drummer Chris White was both an early Jazzmobile administrator and a CBA member: see Porter, *This Thing Called Jazz*, 217.

<sup>79</sup> Laurie Johnston, “Afro-American Suite Brilliant,” undated newspaper clipping, *BTP*, 166/4; David Bailey to Jazzmobile Board, 2 Mar. 1977, *BTP*, 166/11. On the civil rights context of hardbop, see Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

the composer John Duffy in protest, and accused Jazzmobile of having “a policy excluding ‘avant garde’ musicians.” Jenkins then queried Jazzmobile’s funding and asked, rhetorically but pointedly, “who defines jazz and the men who practice it?” Why, he pressed, couldn’t “the masses” appreciate free jazz?<sup>80</sup> These were searching questions, spurred in part by the mid-1970s migration to New York of many experimental musicians from Chicago.<sup>81</sup> They show that much was excluded by “America’s classical music.” Its Black Arts imperative was not very aesthetically adventurous.

It was, however, educationally effective. Jazzmobile’s formal pedagogic programs consisted of Saturday morning music workshops and lecture/concert series for black schools. They often deployed the idea of “America’s classical music,” though not fully. Working with children, Taylor’s main aim was to spark interest. “We might start off with *Work Song* or a spiritual or with anything they were familiar with,” he explained. “The more we did that, the less we had to deal with the basics.... We just stated it was America’s classical music and went on from there.”<sup>82</sup> The nuances of race and nation were not delineated as carefully as in his dissertation, and a Black Arts aesthetic was not as prominent as, for instance, in an AACM School of Music.<sup>83</sup> But the sense of a black “value system” remained central. By closing the lecture/concerts with the funky theme from the 1971 blaxploitation hit *Shaft*, “America’s classical music” regularly brought the house down.<sup>84</sup>

Jazzmobile’s funding exposes the ambiguities in the idea best of all, for Taylor did not hesitate to restructure “America’s classical music” when seeking private

---

<sup>80</sup> Leroy Jenkins to John Duffy, 21 Dec. 1976, *BTP*, 165/15.

<sup>81</sup> See George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Ch. 9.

<sup>82</sup> Smith, “Jazzmobile: Magnetizing the Arts,” 15.

<sup>83</sup> See Lewis, *Power Stronger than Itself*, 177.

<sup>84</sup> Shirley DeLeon, “Clapping Hands with Billy Taylor,” *Sign: National Catholic Magazine*, Apr. 1973, 27-28.

sponsorship. In a press release discussing “the need for new financial support for Jazzmobile’s many and varied services,” he stressed that “America’s classical music” was “unique, durable and ubiquitous.... Its appeal is universal yet it does not get the attention and support it deserves.” He stated that “Jazzmobile goes into the heart of living communities, making no political, ethnic, religious or class distinctions,” and he avoided any mention of an “Afro-American value system.”<sup>85</sup> Funding serious art was the priority; explicating the complex racial dynamics that structured jazz history was not. Jazzmobile displayed corporate logos on its float, and attracted the sponsorship of Ballantine Beer, Chemical Bank, Coca Cola, and Exxon during the 1970s, as well as public funding from city, state, and federal sources.<sup>86</sup> It had a strong sense of what one public administrator called “institutional pressures.”<sup>87</sup> Critics like Jenkins, Taylor later argued, were “unable to match their disapproval with the funds we needed.”<sup>88</sup> So different versions of “America’s classical music” emerged for different audiences. In boardrooms, jazz was serious and classical, “non-political, non-controversial, strictly cultural” (as Jazzmobile’s executive director put it when courting sponsorship).<sup>89</sup> But in schools and neighbourhoods, jazz was popular, functional, serious, and black. The extent to which these audiences saw jazz as “classical,” however, is very unclear. Taylor had an acute grasp of the means required to gain financial and institutional support for jazz, but his sense of the ends served were often fuzzier.

Taylor’s idea was proving flexible, especially in settings where he could reshape it himself. He was particularly nimble in interviews. Take, for instance, a piece in the *Long Island Sunday Press* in 1976: “Jazz is America’s classical music –

---

<sup>85</sup> Handwritten insert for Peter Levinson Communications Press Release, 1974, *BTP*, 165/6.

<sup>86</sup> List compiled from Jazzmobile brochures, 1972 and 1980, *BTP*, 164/14 and 164/15.

<sup>87</sup> Carol Fineburg to Jazzmobile, 29 Mar. 1977, *BTP*, 165/10.

<sup>88</sup> Taylor with Reed, *Jazz Life*, 158.

<sup>89</sup> Paul West to James Graves, 3 Feb. 1972, *BTP*, 166/8.

America's, not just blacks', ' says popular jazz pianist Billy Taylor, and he says it with the eloquence, smoothness and conviction that make him one of the best spokesmen jazz has ever had."<sup>90</sup> For an audience of Long Islanders reading a Sunday newspaper, Taylor trumpeted national dimensions, but he did not let the racial dynamics disappear (the "just" was important). Rather, the idea provided a snappy way into a discussion about nation and race in the Bicentennial year. "Although we've been doing well in funding and supporting jazz as a major art form, we could be doing better – and," he pressed, "as for doing something worthwhile about jazz and black music in general as part of the Bicentennial, we haven't scratched the surface."<sup>91</sup> The jazz ambassador began with national dimensions, but moved on to emphasize that jazz was part of black music in general, and in need of financial support.

Similar dynamics can be seen in Taylor's wider Bicentennial activities. Under the auspices of the federal American Revolution Bicentennial Administration (ARBA), Taylor helped to plan and run an "American Bicentennial Jazz Celebration." ARBA brochures urged a "fresh dedication" to "America's classical music," as an embodiment of "the American point of view." Though an overt sense of an "Afro-American value system" was missing, plans for a "Black Music" celebration were quietly included towards the end of the brochures "for those institutions seeking to present the Afro-American experience in interdisciplinary terms."<sup>92</sup> An official federal celebration was a major achievement, especially given the ambivalence that surrounded many Bicentennial activities.<sup>93</sup> However, on Tony Brown's *Black Journal*, a public television show on which Taylor had become the musical director,

---

<sup>90</sup> Byron Belt, "Jazz: An American Sound," *Long Island Sunday Press*, 21 Mar. 1976.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> "The American Bicentennial Jazz Celebration," ARBA brochure, 1976, *BTP*, 272/5.

<sup>93</sup> See Christopher Capozzola, "'It Makes You Want to Believe in the Country': Celebrating the Bicentennial in an Age of Limits," in *America in the Seventies*, ed. Beth Bailey and David Farmer (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 29-49.

“America’s classical music” played a different role in the “blackcentennial” theme of the 1976 season. From behind the *Black Journal* piano, Taylor was able to articulate his race/nation dualism with precision by quoting directly from his dissertation. Jazz, he said, was both the “musical expression of Black consciousness” and “a melting pot of musical ideas” that was structured by “the Afro-American value system.”<sup>94</sup> Viewers were exposed to a forceful idea, and one music professor from Cleveland State University wrote in to agree that “America’s Black musicians are playing, indeed, as Dr. Taylor contends, the ‘Amer. Classical Music’ when they perform jazz.”<sup>95</sup>

When it came to institutional work, Taylor knew how to play the game, and he played it very well. He sat on the boards of philanthropic and cultural organizations, was a trustee of the Rockefeller Foundation by 1978, and never missed a chance to schmooze a politician. Indeed, after a White House event in 1975, the Secretary of Agriculture and arch-conservative Earl Butz wrote to emphasize “how much I enjoyed chatting with you at the dinner table” and to praise “that wonderful philosophy that you have.”<sup>96</sup> Taylor also emerged as a formidable advocate for publicly funding jazz during his tenure on the National Council of the Arts from 1978. The Black Arts poet, Baraka-associate, and arts administrator A. B. Spellman remembered that “Billy Taylor and I had many heated arguments with council members about giving some parity to jazz with classical music in the guidelines of the Arts Endowment.”<sup>97</sup> Wielding a PhD that demanded that jazz *was* classical music, these were arguments that Taylor could win.

---

<sup>94</sup> Copy for *Black Journal*, BTP, 161/11.

<sup>95</sup> C.A. Colombi to *Black Journal*, 9 Feb. 1976, BTP, 161/5.

<sup>96</sup> Earl Butz to Billy Taylor, 10 Feb. 1975, BTP, 189/15.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in Farley, “Jazz as a Black American Art Form,” 115.



Taylor's success as a jazz ambassador lay in his ability to recognize what could be articulated in different contexts. Such flexibility had long formed part of the expectation that public, black intellectuals could and should explain and embody "blackness" to white audiences.<sup>98</sup> But jazz created specific challenges. "Blackness" was an idea that had long structured jazz's cultural identity, commercial appeal, and artistic validity (often in overlapping ways). For many, it created a sense that black players had a special authority over jazz, perhaps even an instinctive affinity.<sup>99</sup> This made the jazz ambassador a particular kind of black intellectual, for to explain and embody jazz was always to leave yourself vulnerable to being trapped by the notions of blackness that surrounded the music. Indeed, Taylor argued that jazz giants had long failed as ambassadors by succumbing to stereotype. "I'm a teacher because Dizzy [Gillespie]... and Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington refused to do it," he told fellow pianist and jazz journalist Len Lyons. Taylor went on to discuss, in unusually forthright terms, the difference between a jazz artist and a jazz ambassador. "I knew that these men knew intellectually what they were doing, but I read interview after interview where they came off sounding like idiots." What grated most was their tendency to disarm with a grin, a sly witticism, or "bebop" slang. "The writers reported accurately what they were saying, but what they said was bullshit." Worse, their refusal to engage with non-musicians "gave people outside the field reason to say jazz cannot be analyzed, it cannot be taught."<sup>100</sup> They had no sense of their responsibilities as public figures. Great jazz artists, Taylor felt, were not necessarily good jazz ambassadors.

---

<sup>98</sup> Matlin, *On the Corner*, 1-35; Holloway, *Confronting the Veil*, 157-94.

<sup>99</sup> For two anxious responses to this sense, see Charley Gerard, *Jazz in Black and White: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Jazz Community* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998); and Gene Lees, *Cats of Any Color: Jazz in Black and White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>100</sup> Len Lyons, "Billy Taylor: Jazz Pianist, PhD," *Contemporary Keyboard*, Dec. 1976; reprinted in Len Lyons, *The Great Jazz Pianists: Speaking of Their Lives and Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1983), 183.

Rather, Taylor thought, good jazz ambassadors should be educators. This was a conviction he embodied as “Dr. Billy Taylor”: stylish, sharp, non-threatening but unapologetic. He combined a delicacy of emphasis with a finesse in presentation, and stood in opposition to what his publicity material called “the stereotyped jazz musician.”<sup>101</sup> His ambassadorial activities were less about virtuosic artistry than pedagogic performance and institutional work. He spoke with different voices to different audiences, but gathered it all around the idea that jazz was America’s classical music and therefore deserved to be publicly funded, privately sponsored, meaningfully recognized as black achievement, incorporated into curricula, taken seriously at the Bicentennial, understood as part of a blackcentennial, and propagated to urban black communities. These were real victories. Politicians were charmed, communities served, children compelled, corporations persuaded, educators embarrassed, and attentions caught.

Things began to change in the early 1980s. Jazzmobile, for instance, had to operate in a political context that had become hostile to public subsidy for the arts.<sup>102</sup> So in 1981 it produced a plan for “Institutional Advancement,” which aimed to reduce its dependency on public funding, and which declared its mission statement to be the presentation, propagation, and preservation of “AMERICA’S CLASSICAL MUSIC AS A NATIONAL TREASURE.”<sup>103</sup> The thumpingly national side of Taylor’s idea was emphasised more and more in these years: jazz was “the music which expresses the American concept of individual freedom best.”<sup>104</sup> Ideas like the black aesthetic or

---

<sup>101</sup> John N. Goudas for King Features Syndicate, “Billy Taylor: The Compleat [*sic*] Musician,” BTP, 140-A/11.

<sup>102</sup> Joseph Wesley Ziegler, *Arts in Crisis: The National Endowment for the Arts Versus America* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1994), Ch. 4; Donna M. Binkiewicz, *Federalizing the Muse: United States Arts Policy and the National Endowment for the Arts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 217-25.

<sup>103</sup> Jazzmobile, “Institutional Advancement Program: Four Year Plan,” Mar. 1981, BTP, 164/11.

<sup>104</sup> Jazzmobile brochure, 1980, BTP, 164/14.

a collective consciousness no longer formed part of Jazzmobile's promotional material. By the mid-1980s it declared that "our multi-ethnic audience includes people from all backgrounds including culturally deprived, infirmed, and handicapped audiences."<sup>105</sup> Nationalism and multiculturalism were becoming newly prominent in Taylor's idea. In its public articulations, "America's classical music" came to seem closer to Murray than Baraka.

Taylor's own public statements went in a similar direction. Fewer mentions of the "Afro-American value system" were made, and he stressed national dynamics more: "jazz reflects the spontaneity and mobility of American life and is a musical reflection of our ideal of a multicultural society."<sup>106</sup> The melting pot was no longer Taylor's go-to trope for explaining how race structured the nation; instead the national was invoked to soothe the racial. And, while the Black Arts movement waned, Taylor's idea could be transplanted into whiter contexts. In 1987, a Long Island arts camp called the Usdan Center incorporated "America's classical music" into their program, and asked Taylor to teach it.<sup>107</sup> This was a long way from Jazzmobile. Little in the way of black pride could be found at leafy Usdan.

Some contexts for Taylor's idea changed radically, and went beyond America. In 1982, the United States International Communications Agency (USICA, a brief incarnation of the United States Information Agency) sent Taylor on a tour of India, Pakistan, Yemen, Sudan, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco. State Department-sponsored jazz tours had existed since 1956, as part of Cold War attempts to promote American

---

<sup>105</sup> Jazzmobile, "Jazzmobile, Inc: Background Information," mid-1980s, *BTP*, 164/7.

<sup>106</sup> Billy Taylor, "Jazz, America's Classical Music," mid-1990s, *BTP*, 132/24. Cf. Billy Taylor, "Jazz: America's Classical Music," *The Black Perspective in Music* Volume 14, No 1 (Winter 1986), 21-25; this article is often taken and sometimes anthologized as the definitive statement of Taylor's views, but was in fact a short presentation to one symposium over a decade after his dissertation had been submitted.

<sup>107</sup> Dale Lewis to Billy Taylor, 10 Oct. 1986, *BTP*, 194/8.

culture abroad.<sup>108</sup> Taylor's idea fitted in well, and the USICA afterwards assured him that the international "appreciation of jazz as America's classical music" had been a triumphant success.<sup>109</sup> Yet the idea had a very hard time getting through. In India, for instance, the press consistently failed to catch its subtleties. "Billy feels jazz is not the music of Black Americans," reported Kolkata's *Anadabazar*, "but it's American classical music."<sup>110</sup> "It has grown into a music that reflects more vividly and completely, the American way of life and can be aptly termed as the classical music of the USA," echoed the *Hindustan Standard*, which included only a glancing reference at the end of the article to "African heritage."<sup>111</sup> Complex racial politics did not work outside a national context, and jazz was sometimes not reported as a form of black music at all. Three a.m. starts, bureaucratic fumbles, and inadequate pianos made the entire tour a frustrating experience. "Boy, was I suckered on this one," wrote Taylor.<sup>112</sup> His idea had been forged in and for America; it struggled to work in more global contexts.

In national contexts, Taylor's embodiment of the idea was changing. The glasses got bigger, a large wig became a permanent fixture, and Taylor settled into a role as an elder statesman. On one level, this meant that he spoke to larger audiences: he presented a series on National Public Radio, worked as an occasional arts correspondent for *CBS Sunday Morning* from 1982, and had an institutional base at the Kennedy Center from 1994. But his public image became worryingly stuffy in the process. "Perhaps because he looks establishment, has a Ph.D. degree and seven honorary degrees, and writes for symphonies," reported the Associated Press in 1992,

---

<sup>108</sup> The major history of the tours is Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*.

<sup>109</sup> Edward C. McBride to Billy Taylor, 17 Mar. 1982, *BTP*, 194/9.

<sup>110</sup> "Two Intimate Evenings in Forceful Jazzfest," *Anandabazar* (Kolkata) clipping, 22 Feb. 1982, *BTP*, 194/9 (USICA translation).

<sup>111</sup> "Mr. Jazz Shows Where His Roots Lie," *Hindustan Standard* clipping, Feb. 1982, *BTP*, 194/9.

<sup>112</sup> Billy Taylor, Tour Report, entry for 5 Feb. 1982, *BTP*, 194/9.

“people sometimes think Taylor’s jazz would be academic, not funky or swinging.”<sup>113</sup> The article then quoted Taylor: “They don’t say that to my face... But I do get those feelings. Quite often I’m asked to recommend people for jobs I’d like to do.”<sup>114</sup> Some of this was self-inflicted, for Taylor now performed in fewer clubs and more concert halls, and his swing did sound more polite.<sup>115</sup> But the “classical” label was also becoming dominant in ways he had never intended. “America’s classical music” now suggested nationally uniting music, and high, perhaps academic, art.

Taylor occasionally tried to reclaim a Black Arts imperative. He took note of hip-hop, and in 1995 released “On This Lean, Mean Street,” a jazz rap about neighbourhood responsibility.<sup>116</sup> Moderating an earnest panel discussion on “The Marriage of Jazz and Hip-Hop in the 90s,” he pointed to the West African griot as a figure of continuity in black music, and he titled a later album *Urban Griot*.<sup>117</sup> The pose did not convince all, however, and “suburban griot” was the verdict of *JazzTimes*.<sup>118</sup> Taylor’s dynamism as a jazz ambassador had always been about his capacity to negotiate different contexts, but these were becoming more disparate as his persona was becoming less agile.

Indeed, he could no longer claim a monopoly over his idea. “America’s classical music” had caught on, and appeared in increasingly divergent forms from the mid-1980s. Grover Sales wrote his book about it; politicians began to deploy it. For the young Wynton Marsalis, a sense of it was useable in his neoclassical critique of fusion. “The question in jazz has always been: is it pop music or is it a classical

---

<sup>113</sup> Mary Campbell for the Associated Press, “Jazzman Taylor Returns to Performing,” newspaper clipping, 1992, *BTP*, 125/4.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Especially Billy Taylor, *Solo* (Taylor-Made Recordings T1002, 1988).

<sup>116</sup> Track six on Billy Taylor, *Homage* (GRP 98062, 1995).

<sup>117</sup> Copy for “Summer 1994 Newsletter,” *BTP*, 133/19; Billy Taylor, *Urban Griot* (Soundpost SP3050-2, 2001).

<sup>118</sup> Russell Carlson, review of *Urban Griot* by Billy Taylor, *JazzTimes*, Oct. 2001, <http://www.jazztimes.com/articles/12563-urban-griot-billy-taylor-trio>.

music?” he told an interviewer in 1990. “And I don’t mean classical in terms of European music, but I mean does it have formal aspects that make it worthy of study, and does it carry pertinent mythic information about being American[?]”<sup>119</sup> Fusion did not, so was not jazz. Marsalis did not embrace Taylor’s idea as a slogan, nor was he troubled by its complex intellectual genealogy. Rather, he played a variation on something in the air.

“America’s classical music” had become a jazz standard, open to many interpretations. There was Ken Burns, who televised jazz as “the only art form created by Americans.”<sup>120</sup> And there was Stanley Crouch, who venerated “the highest American musical form.”<sup>121</sup> And Scott DeVeaux, who worried about the “looming new orthodoxy.”<sup>122</sup> And even Amiri Baraka, who late in his Marxist incarnation came to assert “the historical phenomenon that black American music was also American Classical music.”<sup>123</sup> The divergent diffusion of Taylor’s idea shows that the “jazz renaissance” was neither possessed by a single dogma, nor cut off from the “dark ages” that came before. Black Arts imperatives were not misguided impulses surmounted by Murray, Crouch, and Marsalis; they resonated through late twentieth century U.S. culture. The history of “America’s classical music” undermines the utility of the “jazz renaissance” as a periodizing category, and underlines the need for its careful historicization.

---

<sup>119</sup> Lolis Eric Elie, “An Interview with Wynton Marsalis,” *Callaloo* Volume 13, No 2 (Spring 1990), 282.

<sup>120</sup> Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *Jazz: A History of America’s Music* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), vii.

<sup>121</sup> Crouch, *Considering Genius*, 173.

<sup>122</sup> DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” 553.

<sup>123</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 12; cf. William Maxwell, “Black Arts Survivals in the New New Jazz Studies,” *American Literary History*, 23 (2011), 873-84.

In 1995, Taylor was confronted with the ubiquity of his idea. “You’re one of the true believers in jazz as America’s classical music,” prodded an interviewer. “I have to take the credit or blame for that,” countered Taylor.

In order to get my doctorate, I had to pose a problem and solve it for my committee. I said that based on my own research, jazz is America’s classical music. I’m talking to people who are trained in European Classical music – with a capital C. I said that “from what you describe as classical music and what the dictionary says it is, jazz meets all the criteria.”... I won the argument.<sup>124</sup>

Taylor got his doctorate, though the wider victory was equivocal. He continued to perform for over a decade, but his idea had stretched beyond coherence and into cliché. He died in 2010. Today, in most settings, the idea of “America’s classical music” feels weak in conveying the often difficult but always insistent meanings that circle around jazz. It clearly fails as a final answer to the perpetually persistent question of what jazz *is*. But, for a while, it worked. It had subtleties, priorities, deep roots. It did things in a world of “racism, ignorance, paternalism, greed, prejudice and other non-musical elements.” And it matters, for non-musical elements still define the role of the jazz ambassador.<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>124</sup> Michael Bourne, “Billy Taylor: The Jazz Doctor,” *Cognac Hennessy Jazz Notes*, Fall 1995, 1.

<sup>125</sup> Tom Arnold-Forster is a PhD candidate at Jesus College, Cambridge. For commenting on earlier drafts of this article, he would like to thank members of the Cambridge American History Workshop, two anonymous reviewers, Daniel Matlin, Joel Isaac, Tom Pye, and, especially, Michael O’Brien.